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Naval Hospital Bremerton Corpsmen support Black Hills 2014 Joint Field Exercise

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The Black Hills of South Dakota are about as far removed from the open ocean as can be, but that was exactly where Sailors from Naval Hospital Bremerton have been training of late.

Four teams of hospital corpsmen are taking part in 2014 Joint Field Exercise (JFE) not only supporting the Army National Guard's Officer Candidate Program and 196th Regiment, but also honing their skills in austere surroundings similar to down range in Afghanistan.

The 2014 JFE is centered at the historical U.S. Army outpost of Fort Meade. The base continues to provide significant operational focus and preparatory training due to the surrounding terrain being suitable grounds for engaging in maneuvers, exercise and evolutions for personnel who deployed to Iraqi for Operation Iraqi Freedom in the past and for those who are heading down-range to Afghanistan to support Operation Enduring Freedom.



Keeping step, one cadence at a time...Hospital Corpsman 3rd Class John Shaddix of Naval Hospital Bremerton (NHB) takes part in a daily forced march during Joint Field Exercise (JFE) with the Army National Guard's Officer Candidate Program and 196th Regiment at the historical U.S. Army outpost of



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Fort Meade, South Dakota. Shaddix was responsible for providing such medical support during the hikes as dealing with blisters, handling heat casualties and combating dehydration. (Photo courtesy of 196th RTI Officer Candidate School)

According to Electronics Technician Chief Jack Bower, JFE coordinator, NHB's corpsmen have been tasked with supporting the Army National Guard's Officer Candidate Program, an eight-week long course that started in June.

"Based on their training schedule, they need teams of four corpsmen to provide medical coverage to 50-100 staff and 100-200 officer candidates during the various events and field exercises. To accomplish this we are sending four, four-person teams for approximately two weeks apiece," said Bower, adding that NHB was able to send 15 corpsmen this year. "This is a special opportunity and we are looking for more opportunities like this to expand the number of corpsmen that get this additional training and experience."

Each corpsmen team spends 15 days at Fort Meade, which allows a day for turnover with the previous team, getting in some familiarization with their surroundings, and then undertaking 14 days of providing medical coverage and medical support, primarily in the field.

Bower attests that there are several objectives that the corpsmen are being entrusted to accomplish during their time in South Dakota.

"First, we want our corpsmen to expand their medical knowledge by working in an environment similar to what they might experience in the field as a fleet marine force (FMF) corpsman or even in some ways as an independent duty corpsman (IDC) and less like in our own well-staffed hospital. Second, we want our corpsmen to experience how the Army practices field medicine so that they have that knowledge and experience that may serve them in the future if they go on deployments with joint service medical missions and facilities," Bower explained.

Some of the field exercises have required the corpsman to be able to operate relatively autonomously or with a small team. The corpsmen are also working side-by-side on a daily basis with both junior and senior Army medics and physician assistants (PA) to provide needed medical care to any patient in need, as well as receive instruction, guidance and hands-on experience in working with and in a joint environment.

"Our corpsmen have told me that through this experience they have experienced an approach to medicine, meaning field medicine, that they have not seen before and it has provided them a new perspective on medicine in the field and in combat situations," noted Bower.

"This exercise was a very beneficial training opportunity not only to establish joint operations with Army medical, but to also provide first hand experiences with the Army. The other corpsmen and I noticed the Army has a whole different language compared to the Navy," said Hospital Corpsman 3rd Class Kimberly Huidor, just returned from the exercise.



Providing medical support with a watchful eye...Naval Hospital Bremerton's Hospital Corpsman 3rd Class Kimberly Huidor 2014 takes part in Joint Field Exercise (JFE) with the Army National Guard's Officer Candidate Program and 196th Regiment at the historical U.S. Army outpost of Fort Meade, South Dakota. Huidor was part of one of the four, 4-member corpsmen teams sent to the Black Hills locale to help provide medical coverage to 50-100 staff and 100-200 officer candidates during the various events and field exercises held over an eight-week summer period. (Photo courtesy of 196th RTI Officer Candidate School)

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During the two weeks that Huidor, an El Paso, Texas native, spent at Fort Meade, she and her fellow corpsmen actively took part in supporting the officer candidates in their five and ten mile hikes, engaging in day and night navigation, conducting morning and evening sick-call, and providing tailgate medicine during chow hours.

“We did everything from distributing simple medications, to patching up blisters, combating a heat casualty and providing IV fluids to both instructors and students,” said Huidor.

Bower stresses that the major benefit for the corpsmen being with their fellow Army servicemembers is being able to broaden their vision and gain experience as it relates to future service in joint military medicine evolutions. Many of the corpsmen are relatively new to the Navy and their experience has just been limited to their rating school, followed by being assigned in a military treatment facility/hospital setting. 2014 JFE is an opportunity that affords them a glimpse of other prospects in the military’s medical field that could spark an interest to professionally pursue in their future.

“The second great benefit is that our corpsmen also attended several training and certification events prior to their departure, which was oriented at improving each corpsman’s ability and confidence to work autonomously, raising their baseline medical knowledge level, and teaching them tactical medicine. Other benefits include experiencing how another branch of the military approaches medical practices, learning about and then practicing medicine in the field, and (also) getting to experience a beautiful and historical part of our country,” said Bower.

Including Navy Medicine assets in this Army pilot program has raised a few challenges, specifically in communication and coordination, but Bower attests that the differences in the services has been bridged and the end result has been that valuable lessons have been learned and will be incorporated into future JFEs.

“With this the initial establishment of the program, we have had to understand the Army’s program, their medical service needs, and also ensure that we thought of everything that our corpsmen could encounter. It has been a big task,” Bower said. “But having our boots on the ground at Fort Meade, working side-by-side with the fantastic staff of the 196th Regiment, and witnessing a program that is able to contribute to the larger goals of our hospital has been very rewarding.”

Each corpsman has been required to attend Tactical Combat Casualty Care (TCCC) prior to JFE. TCCC required all participants to wear Kevlar, field vests, and helmets. They carry weapon simulators, and navigate tactically while treating patients wounded in combat. The challenging course is built to help the corpsman think about his or her surroundings, be able to focus under stress, and ensure that the correct medical treatment is provided in a simulated combat environment. Even bolstered with that training, the involvement in JFE was scaled back to concentrate primarily on providing direct medical support if and when needed.

“The corpsmen’s main role in the Army’s program required limited involvement in the actual land navigation or combat exercises because we are there to ensure medical coverage. They get to experience all of the exercise, but from a safe perspective. Some of our corpsmen elected to take part on several of the Army’s marches and I’m proud to say that they did very well,” Bower said.

A typical 2014 JFE day for the corpsmen had them up early to provide medical coverage for pre-breakfast exercises such as combatant training, challenge courses, three mile runs, and water survival training. They then conducted sick call, along with holding clinical hours in the morning. They carried out such duties as testing and treating water sources, stocking medical supply bags, and providing medical support throughout the day. During field exercises, the corpsmen split into one or two-person teams to man various medical posts, concerned with any possible signs of heat-stress, injury, fatigue, and illness.

“I would highly recommend taking this exercise! My fellow corpsmen and I had a wonderful experience working along with the Army providers, witnessing the Army’s training, and being able to see the sights of South Dakota,” Huidor said.

Bower hopes that pending the successful completion and review of this pilot program in late July, it will become an annual event for NHB to participate.

“What has been gratifying for me as the JFE Coordinator is to see the further development of our corpsmen who can better serve our Soldiers and Sailors during their follow on tours of duty. That and seeing the hard work that we have put into establishing this program pay off in terms of the successful deployment, medical service, and return of our corpsmen. Army personnel have shook my hand and told me how much they appreciate our corpsmen’s expertise, professionalism, and willingness to help out,” stated Bower.

TAGS: hospital corpsman, JFE, Joint Field Exercise, naval hospital, Navy medicine, sailors, soldiers